

Pioneer Press, February 28, 2008

Holocaust survivors and their families now have access to a previously closed international repository of data from Nazi archives in Bad Arolsen, Germany, simply by submitting online requests for information to it or to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

The Bad Arolsen archives are managed by the International Tracing Service, ITS, a repository managed by the International Committee of the Red Cross to collect and hold documents collected by the Allies about the Nazi program of mass murder of Jews after World War II.

The detailed information identifies families and individuals and their treatment during the 12 years Nazis were in power, 1933 to 1945. The response to inquiries by families is supposed to arrive within at least eight weeks of its request.

The address for the online forms is <http://www.ushmm.com/> or <http://www.its-arolsen.org/>.

The archives have been closed to the public for six decades. Persistent and strong resistance to opening them to the public was based on provisions intended to limit harm to survivors and their families in the 1955 Bonn Agreement.

'Never again'

"The opening of Bad Arolsen will provide many survivors and family members the closure they were denied for more than 60 years," said U.S. Representative Mark S. Kirk, R-10th, of Highland Park. "At a time when the President of Iran sponsors official Holocaust denial conferences and genocide continues in Sudan, the opening of these archives should renew the pledge we took in 1945: 'Never again.' "

"It's a massive, massive, massive amount of material never made available to researchers (or the public)," said Paul A. Shapiro, director of the Holocaust Memorial Museum's Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies.

Shapiro helped negotiate the opening of this archive, the world's largest major inaccessible collection of Holocaust-related documents. He is a member of the Congressional Interagency Working Group on Nazi War Crimes and Japanese Imperial Government Records. Kirk is past co-chairman of the House Task Force on Anti-Semitism and, in February, 2007, led a letter-writing campaign with Representative Alcee Hastings, D-Florida, urging the International Commission to ratify treaty amendments to allow public access to the ITS archives.

The Bad Arolsen archive offers the most extensive documentation about Nazi persecution of Jews, political prisoners, mental patients, homosexuals, handicapped persons, Gypsies, and people labeled as undesirable.

"There is material there on the fates of 17.5 million people," Shapiro said. "It's a tremendously rich resource."

He said the "highest priority," now that the archive is open, is for survivors and their families to request information about the fate of family members. That information needs to be in the hands of survivors.

Lots of requests

"We want it," he said of the anticipated wave of requests. "We've already had thousands of requests. We've had some private support to be able to (respond to requests)."

Shapiro said requests can be made of the ITS itself or of the Holocaust Memorial Museum. Indeed, he suggested the response to requests from the museum might yield more family information since it is the Museum's policy to respond to requests for information from their own, additional, extensive collection.

"For some people there is a very high likelihood they will find something," he said. "We're doing a number of outreach programs to guide people through the process."

Shapiro said the process to open the archives has been a long struggle, but the current situation is much improved.

"One result of this (opening of the archives) is that Bad Arolsen has become more energetic to respond to requests," he said.

It was not always thus.

Allies collected information after World War II and placed it in Bad Arolsen, Germany, a small town. The management of the archive was subject to the mutual agreement of 11 governments as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Also, "You had an on-site staff that was obstructionist," Shapiro said. "You faced a structure that allowed people to evade responsibility."

In addition to resistance to opening the archive, there was no accurate sense of what it contained.

"There was a lot of ignorance about the significance of the material," said Shapiro. "At the Tracing Service, they never had a historian on staff. They never had a formally-trained archivist."

It was only in 2001 that the staff of the Holocaust Memorial Museum got involved to help open the archive to survivors and researchers.

"The survivor generation was disappearing in front of our eyes," Shapiro said.

People wanted to know that had happened to their families and friends. In addition, he said,

they were concerned that what had happened would be forgotten once they themselves have died. For those reasons, the opening of the archive and the anticipated requests for information is considered very important. There are other considerations too.

"It's very dramatic material," he said.

The data reveals the fate of individuals, places the loss of people into the historical record, and also creates a timeline of how the killing of so many people occurred over time. Shapiro said the data in the archive will not change the reality of the Holocaust or what is now known about it. Instead, more details are provided. For example, there are millions of pages of information about the forced and slave labor programs.

"We haven't seen that before," he said.

There is information about the post-war period when displaced persons were faced with the hostile reaction of authorities to their plight. In addition, the immediate post-war testimony about the Holocaust and what happened will now be available for the first time.

"There are records there of war criminals who passed themselves off as displaced persons," Shapiro said. "You can see how people like that abused the system created to help others."

He knows from a backlog of 450,000 requests for information received at Bad Arolsen that people want to know what happened. It has taken time, but the Holocaust record continues to become public.

"Genocide has a long tail," Shapiro said.